

# If you Say that Idioms Should be Learned, then Why don't you Teach them? A Case Study of In-service EFL Teachers<sup>1</sup>

*Jacqueline Soto-Jurado<sup>2</sup> & Edgar Emmanuell Garcia-Ponce<sup>3</sup>, Universidad de Guanajuato, Guanajuato, Gto, Mexico*

## Abstract

Recent communicative teaching approaches view learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as involving more than knowledge of grammar structures. Students are expected to develop communicative skills which allow them to interact inside and outside the language classroom. To this end, learning idioms plays a significant role because these expressions improve students' proficiency, fluency and native-like performance (Boers et al., 2006). However, even though they are beneficial for students' language skills, some teachers may decide to avoid teaching these expressions in the classroom. Motivated by this, the present study examines the perceptions of five Mexican EFL teachers concerning the teaching of English idioms. Semi-structured interviews reveal that the five teachers perceive that teaching idioms is highly important for developing students' communicative competence. However, the results also indicate that four teachers avoid teaching them because of institutional demands to cover a textbook and their perceptions of their students' low proficiency levels. This evidence suggests that pre- and in-service teacher education programs should provide teachers with a better understanding of strategies that they can use to teach idioms.

## Resumen

En enfoques comunicativos, el aprendizaje del inglés es más que el desarrollo de estructuras gramaticales. Se espera que los estudiantes desarrollen habilidades comunicativas que les permitan interactuar dentro y fuera del salón de clase. Para esto, el aprendizaje de frases idiomáticas juega un papel importante porque promueven el desarrollo de la competencia, fluidez y un desempeño oral cercano al de un nativo hablante. Sin embargo, a pesar de que pueden ser de beneficio para los estudiantes, algunos maestros de inglés deciden no enseñar estas expresiones en el salón de clase. Por lo tanto, el presente estudio de caso explora las percepciones de cinco maestros de inglés como lengua extranjera sobre la enseñanza de expresiones idiomáticas. Al haber recolectado datos cualitativos a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas, los resultados muestran que los cinco maestros perciben que la enseñanza de estas expresiones es importante para el desarrollo de la competencia lingüística de los estudiantes. Sin embargo, los resultados también muestran que cuatro maestros evitan enseñarlas debido a necesidades institucionales de cubrir el libro de texto y sus percepciones sobre un nivel de competencia bajo de sus estudiantes para poder usar y aprender estas expresiones. Esta evidencia sugiere que la formación de profesores debe proveer a los maestros con estrategias que les permitan enseñar frases idiomáticas y la lengua en general siguiendo sus principios y creencias pedagógicas.

## Introduction

Idioms are expressions often used by native speakers in everyday conversations. These expressions, such as *let's call it a day* and *your guess is as good as mine* can be found in day-to-day interactions which take place in movies, TV shows, and conversations. If students comprehend and know how to use these expressions, their communication skills in the target language will be improved (Cieślicka, 2015; Liontas, 2017; Yağiz & Izadpanah, 2013). Therefore, teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) should involve not only grammar structures, but also expressions which promote the development of students' communicative skills (Çakir, 2011), such as idioms, the focus of this study.

Despite the fact that idioms are cultural expressions which can increase students' language proficiency (Belousova, 2015), they often do not receive much attention in EFL classrooms for several reasons. One reason could be that teaching these expressions is commonly associated with time-filling activities (Liontas, 2017). Moreover, as claimed by Irujo (1986), a significant number of English textbooks do not include activities to teach and learn these expressions, perhaps because teaching and developing productive skills (i.e., speaking and writing) has been the priority in current communicative approaches which are popular in the EFL contexts. When idioms are included in textbooks, they often appear in the vocabulary section without enough exercises and practice to promote the students' understanding and use of these expressions (Irujo, 1986). However, what is not yet clear is why some EFL teachers decide not to teach them, even if they have opportunities to design their own materials and practice idioms in their classrooms. This study investigates five EFL teachers' perceptions of idioms and the role of these expressions in teaching and learning the target

<sup>1</sup> This is a refereed article. Received: 8 September, 2020. Accepted: 3 May 2021

<sup>2</sup> [jakisoto18@gmail.com](mailto:jakisoto18@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> [ee.garcia@uqto.mx](mailto:ee.garcia@uqto.mx), 0000-0002-5414-3862 [Correspondent]

language, with a view to understanding how these teachers view idioms and what possible challenges they face when teaching them.

## Literature Review

### *Defining and Categorizing Idioms*

An idiom can be defined as an expression whose meaning is unpredictable, figurative, and sometimes independent of its individual lexical units (Manzoor & Kiran, 2015; Vasiljevic, 2015). Al-Kadi (2015) defines an idiom as a group of words whose meaning is unique and impossible to translate literally, especially those idioms which have cultural, political, or historical backgrounds. According to Pinnavaia (2002), idioms are “the patrimony of a culture and tradition; they represent centuries of life in a determined sociolinguistic context and geographical setting and are therefore the heart and soul of a linguistic community” (p.2). For example, the idiom *to bury the hatchet* (i.e., to make peace with an enemy) is believed to come from Native American tribes that held a ceremony to make peace with their opponents by burying hatchets to show that the conflict was over (Terban, 1996). Therefore, idioms are an important part of a community because they might hold an important cultural history behind their connotations.

There are different methods of categorizing idioms. Makkai (1972, as cited in Hinkel, 2017) categorizes idioms into two levels: idioms of encoding, when the meaning is transparent and easy to understand (e.g., *lend a hand*), and idioms of decoding, when the connotation is unpredictable (e.g., *white elephant*). In this categorization, idioms are classified depending on the difficulty of decoding their meaning. Mäntylä (2004) groups them into three categories based upon their transparency. The first category is *transparent* which refers to the strong connection between the literal and figurative meaning (i.e., *to see the light*). The second one is *semi-transparent* where there is a connection between the literal and figurative interpretation but this connection is not completely transparent (i.e., *break the ice*). The last one is *opaque* which is when the literal and figurative meaning are different (i.e., *kicked the bucket*). Similarly, Fernando (1996, as cited in Quynh, 2012) categorizes idioms into three groups whose interpretation is similar to the previous categories: *literal*, *semi-literal* and *pure idioms*.

### The Frequency and Communicative Importance of Idiom

Idioms can be found in any discourse form, such as formal speech, informal conversations, social media, movies, and radio (Manzoor & Kiran, 2015). Idioms are a central part of any language because they are used every day in spoken and written communication (Pollio et al., 1977), and idioms are used more often than one might assume. Cooper (1998, 1999) estimates that English native speakers use an idiom around 20 million times in their lifetime. According to a study conducted by Pollio et al. (1977), idiomatic expressions are used every 3-4 minutes in conversation. Kreuz and Roberts (1993) report that idioms account for around 20% of the figurative language in contemporary American literature. These statistics demonstrate the essential role that idioms play in everyday communication. From a teaching and learning perspective, EFL students will definitely encounter these expressions in the real world due to their frequent use by native speakers.

The high frequency of idioms in every day oral and written communication reveals the need to teach these expressions in the language classroom. Boers et al. (2006) claim that learning idioms provides students with opportunities to develop proficiency, fluency, and native-like performance. The use of idioms contributes to more efficient and effective communication because there are situations in which an idiom can replace a much longer expression (Abolfazli & Sadeghi, 2017; Wray, 2000). For example, the expression *a hot potato* refers to a controversial topic that many people know about (Abolfazli & Sadeghi, 2017). Moreover, these expressions, as an important cultural part of any community, also provide students with opportunities to learn about and understand the culture, humor, and society of the target language community (Al-Houti & Aldaihani, 2018; Asri & Rochmawati, 2017; Samani & Hashemian, 2012). It would therefore be beneficial for students to use and understand idioms, in order to more clearly and concisely express their inner thoughts and ideas in both spoken and written discourse (Çakir, 2011). Because of such benefits, Cooper (1998) argues that teaching idioms should be a recurrent practice in EFL classrooms and should not be neglected. Therefore, idioms are expressions that should be included in the classroom, to provide learners with the opportunity to increase their knowledge of the target language and improve their communication skills.

### Challenges of Teaching and Learning Idioms in the Language Classroom

Even though there is evidence that shows that idioms are key to developing communicative competence, students may face several challenges in the process of learning them. According to Irujo (1986), students often struggle to use idioms in the correct linguistic context because idioms can be used in various diverse communicative situations. For example, idiomatic expressions are included in slang (e.g., *you got it*), colloquialisms (e.g., *he kicked the bucket*), and formal situations (e.g., *run the risk*). Students may also find idioms difficult to understand because of their unpredictable meaning (Rizo, 2015; Yağiz & Izadpanah, 2013), their literal meaning (Çakir, 2011), or the students' own limited vocabulary (Çakir, 2011). Collectively, in accordance with Pimenova (2011), the major challenges for students to use and understand idioms are: "unknown vocabulary and unfamiliar idioms, no analog idioms in L1, cultural differences, lack of experience dealing with idioms, and lack of the broad context of a given idiom" (p.117-119).

From a teaching perspective, there is evidence which suggests that there are several instructional and perceptual factors which may compel EFL teachers to avoid teaching idioms in the language classroom. For example, teachers may believe that students will learn idioms when traveling or having contact with native speakers in real contexts (Çakir, 2011; Liontas, 2017). Therefore, teachers might avoid idioms in favor of other language aspects and practices which they think have an immediate priority, such as oral communication or grammar teaching. Other reasons which may encourage teachers to avoid teaching idioms are their perceptions that selecting idioms, designing materials and planning lessons to teach idioms requires a high amount of time and effort (Çakir, 2011; Cooper, 1998; Liontas, 2017).

According to Liontas (2017), teachers perceive idioms as less important than other language aspects and practices due to the fact that there still remains a paucity of published research on idioms. Indeed, the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has paid scant attention to the interplay between how idioms are taught and how teachers perceive them. More research into teachers' perceptions of idioms is necessary because such insights will broaden the current understanding of idioms and assist language teachers in selecting and designing more effective language materials and methods.

Consequently, the primary aim of this study is to explore five EFL teachers' perceptions of idioms, in order to understand which possible factors may influence their decisions behind teaching them or avoiding them in the language classroom. The research question that guides the present study is the following:

*What are the Mexican EFL teachers' perceptions of teaching English idioms?*

By developing an understanding of teachers' perceptions, this study seeks to examine whether or not they teach the expressions, the reasons behind their pedagogical decisions, and the likely challenges that they face teaching them in the classroom. By considering these teachers' perceptions, this study will enhance our understanding of the factors that should be considered during and after English teacher education and training.

## **Methodology**

### **Context**

The present case study is part of a larger research project which was conducted to investigate the interplay between teachers' practices and perceptions of idioms in the Language Center at the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juarez (UACJ), Chihuahua, Mexico. Juarez is a border city with El Paso, Texas, U.S. and its main economic source comes from industry. Many people work in the manufacturing industry, and they frequently communicate with international companies in English. However, it is not only business, since most students also go to El Paso for fun, shopping, and entertainment. It is therefore common for students to have contact with English native speakers and encounter idiomatic expressions while communicating with them.

In this context, the levels of English courses offered in the UACJ Language Center are basic, intermediate, and advanced. Each of these courses lasts for six months. Moreover, English teachers are required to teach the language following a communicative approach. In their lessons, they need to include mechanical, meaningful, and communicative activities practicing all four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). The textbooks used in these courses do not include sections for teaching English idioms. If teachers want to teach these expressions, they can plan and design extra activities because in this context they have the freedom of using any supplemental material they think is necessary.

### **Participants**

Five EFL teachers from the Language Center were invited to participate in this study. Their ages ranged from 23 to 30 years old; two were female and three were male. Four of the participants had a BA degree in English Teaching from UACJ; one was currently pursuing a BA in English teaching. When this study took place, the five teachers were teaching young adults (18+). They were Spanish native speakers, and they all had between a B2 and C1 English proficiency certificate. Complying with their right to be anonymized and protected, the teachers' names and identities were carefully anonymized in the data, and pseudonyms are used in this study. Further, they were under no obligation to participate, and each provided consent to participate via a confidentiality and consent letter.

### **Data collection and analysis**

The case study followed a qualitative paradigm because this paradigm allows for explorations of opinions, experiences and feelings that could emerge from the perceptions of the participants (Dörnyei, 2007). We conducted semi-structured interviews because they allow researchers to obtain in-depth insights into the phenomenon under exploration, incorporate follow-up questions and ask for clarification (Griffiee, 2013). During the interviews, a list of twelve open-ended questions was used (see Appendix 1). The structure of the interview was divided into three different sections: language and culture, idioms in the classroom, and strategies. The interviews lasted from seven to twenty minutes and were conducted in English, audio recorded, and transcribed in their entirety.

There were several steps that we followed to analyse the data obtained from the interviews. First, all the interviews were manually transcribed on a Word document. Second, we read the data several times to familiarize ourselves with it and identify some patterns. Finally, we carried out a meaning categorization by using MaxQDA, a software for processing and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data. Meaning categorization is believed to facilitate the identification of patterns, themes, and meaning (Berg, 2009). To conduct a meaning categorization of the data, we identified and demarcated extracts in which the teachers appeared to be voicing their perceptions of idioms and practices related to teaching them in the classroom. We then searched through the codes with which these extracts were associated in the software. Some of the themes which emerged were: definitions and understandings of idioms, the link between language and culture, the importance of teaching and learning idioms, teachers' decisions to not teach idioms, and student proficiency as a challenge for teaching idioms. In essence, these procedures followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) recommendations to transcribe, get familiar with, code and summarize the data.

### **Results**

In the following section, the results of the interviews are discussed to answer the research question (i.e., *What are the Mexican EFL teachers' perceptions of teaching English idioms?*). In general, the results show that the teachers feel using idioms in the language classroom strengthens the link between language and culture. The participants' responses demonstrate that they understood what an idiom is, but were unable to provide concrete examples of idioms. Despite their assertions that idioms are important language expressions which improve students' oral competence, they stated that they do not often teach them in the language classroom. Based on the participants' reasons for not teaching idioms, some locally situated needs and immediate demands which may compel them to avoid teaching these expressions are discussed.

#### **Definition and understanding of idioms**

In interviews, the five teachers were asked to define the concept of an *idiom* and describe the characteristics of this language expression. In general, the participants' responses demonstrated their understanding of idioms and their ability to describe the characteristics of idioms when asked to do so. For example, Teacher 01 mentioned: "an idiom [...] does not have like a literal meaning; it might have a meaning according to the different environments or the contexts in which people are" (Extract 1).

Teacher 04 suggested:

*An idiom is like a different compound of words that mean something totally different regarding the grammar that they have. I always tell my students not to take them literally because they mean something different. So, yes, they mean something really different from what is written.* (Extract 2)

Teacher 05 similarly explained: "[It is] like an expression that people use. The meaning is not literal, is just figurative" (Extract 3).

Thus, these responses indicate the participants' understanding of idioms as dependent on "different environments or the contexts" (Teacher 01), as "different from what is written" (Teacher 04), and as "figurative" (Teacher 05). These extracts suggest that the teachers were to some extent familiar with the cultural expressions.

Even though these responses showed their understanding of idioms and their linguistic characteristics, two teachers were unable to provide examples of idioms during the interviews. For example, Teacher 01 explained the following point: "to offer coffee or tea, instead of just saying: 'would you want a coffee or tea?' you can just say 'coffee or tea?'. That could be an idiom that most people use. Is *OMG* an idiom?" (Extract 4). Teacher 02 stated: "I do not know, like *what's up?*" (Extract 5). These responses show that the two teachers were describing colloquial expressions (i.e., *OMG* and *what's up*) which are not idioms. The inconsistency of the teachers' explanations of idioms and inability to give examples raises the possibility that their understanding of these language expressions was vague.

### **The link between language and culture**

We asked teachers about their perceptions regarding the connection between language and culture. The teachers' responses show they perceived a strong relationship between culture and language. For example, Teacher 02 commented: "they [language and culture] go hand in hand because you can't just learn a language without knowing the context or the culture. Language [sic] tend to change a lot depending on where you are" (Extract 6). By mentioning that language and culture "go hand in hand," this teacher's response suggests the belief that there is a close relationship between language and culture. Participants explicitly expressed that the link between language and culture is an important one. For example, Teacher 04 suggested:

*I think they are really interrelated because [...] language is shaped by culture. That is why we have different constraints regarding either culture or language. For example, one thing in English cannot be the same in Spanish. I think it is very important that we can understand the language and some of the target culture (Extract 7)*

This response shows that Teacher 04 attaches importance to the relationship between language and culture. Specifically, by saying "one thing in English cannot be the same in Spanish," the teacher is demonstrating a belief that language and culture should be taught in the language classroom, as also evident in: "I think it is very important that we can understand the language and some of the target culture". This sentiment is also supported by Teacher 03 who stated: "we cannot teach a language if you are not talking about culture because you have to teach also certain aspects like manners, what is proper, what is not proper in a certain culture" (Extract 8).

### **Importance of teaching and learning idioms**

When asked about teaching and learning idioms, all of the teachers' responses suggested perceptions which pointed to the importance of teaching and learning idioms in the EFL classroom. For instance, Teacher 01 asserted: "a lot of people use idioms all the time. It is almost like slang. If people do not understand slang, they will get lost in a conversation with friends. So, yeah, it is important" (Extract 9). Teacher 02 stated: "they are important because they are colloquial expressions. A lot of people use them, and sometimes if we do not know them, we do not know what they are talking about [...] It is very important to teach them" (Extract 10). These responses show that the teachers perceived idioms as important because of their high frequency in oral interactions. Specifically, in their responses, the teachers suggest that knowledge of these expressions enhance comprehension among speakers.

When discussing the importance of the knowledge of idioms, the teachers also perceived language learning benefits regarding knowing and using idioms. For example, Teacher 01 made the following observation:

*If you teach idioms, that would give [students] more competence to know how to communicate in different contexts. They will know how to communicate with their friends, and they can also know how to communicate with their boss at work. They will also know when and how to communicate with different idioms. So, I think it [teaching idioms] does have a lot of benefits. (Extract 11)*

Teacher 02 suggested the following response: "I think there are benefits because you tend to sound more natural in terms of speaking. You do not sound like a robot. You don't sound like a book. It's more natural the way you speak" (Extract 12). Similarly, Teacher 04 responded: "I think it helps them in their competence and fluency" (Extract 13). Teacher 05 noted: "language competence is being able to communicate effectively. So, if students do not understand idioms, they won't be able to communicate and express their

ideas or understand what is being spoken" (Extract 14). Thus, the teachers generally perceived several benefits when students develop an understanding of idioms and use them while communicating. Their responses revealed that all of them perceived idioms as important expressions to teach and learn. Specifically, Teachers 01 and 04 claimed that knowledge of idioms enables students to develop competence to communicate with others more effectively. Moreover, Teachers 02 and 05 maintained that when students know idioms, they are able to enhance the clarity of their ideas during oral interactions, as evident in "It's more natural the way you speak" (Teacher 02, Extract 12) and "if students do not understand idioms, they won't be able to communicate and express their ideas" (Teacher 05, Extract 14).

### **Teachers' decisions surrounding idioms**

Despite the fact that all the participants expressed that knowledge of English idioms is important for promoting students' oral communication and competence, only Teacher 04 stated that she has taught them previously in her language classroom. She explained:

*This semester, I think it is the second time that I teach idioms. I did it because I think the [text]books are missing a lot of content and sometimes the lessons are boring [...] So, yes, I plan it [teaching idioms] because I think they need to learn [them] and the content of the [text]book is not so good, in my opinion. (Extract 17)*

Teacher 04 recently began idioms in her classroom. She decided to teach them because the textbook that she uses does not include relevant language content. Although it appears that she teaches to the textbook, she stated that she designs and adapts materials or activities to teach idioms.

The other four teachers claimed that they do not teach idioms. This contrasts with their initial responses which suggested positive attitudes towards teaching and learning idioms to develop students' oral skills. Teacher 01 commented that he does not teach idioms because they are not in the textbook. The majority of the lessons focus on grammar instead of common expressions used by the community of the target language. This may imply that he often teaches to the textbook and does not develop extra material to cover content that is not in the textbook. He explained that for the teachers from the Language Center, it is necessary "to cover many lessons, and the semester is short. So, it is hard to include extra topics. Furthermore, many lessons focus only on grammar structures, but not on expressions that people can use in different situations" (Extract 18). Therefore, time constraints may be the main reason why this teacher does not include cultural expressions in his classroom. Moreover, Teacher 02 mentioned that although he does not include idioms in his teaching practice, he tries to explain the definition of the expressions to his students. However, he asserted: "I do not include them as a topic because we do not have them on the [text]book, but if I use one and my students do not know the meaning I explain it, but just like that" (Extract 19). As with Teacher 01, his assertion demonstrates that he only teaches the content on the textbook, and he does not design extra material to teach idioms. Similarly, Teachers 03 and 05 stated that they do not include idioms in their classrooms because they are not included in the textbook. Teacher 05 went as far as to suggest that she does not "have time to cover and create extra content" (Extract 20). Therefore, these teachers reported that the need to cover the textbook and time constraints are the main factors to not include these cultural expressions in their language classroom. The following section looks at other immediate demands which appear to be highly influential on the teachers' decisions not to teach idioms in the language classroom.

### **Challenges for teaching idiomatic expressions**

For these teachers, teaching idioms in the language class was a problematic experience. Specifically, they claimed that idioms are difficult language expressions to teach due to their hidden connotations and complex meanings. To explore this in greater depth, we asked the teachers to mention what challenges or difficulties they face when teaching or using idioms in the classroom. In general, the participants' responses indicated that one of the recurrent challenges is the students' low proficiency level. For example, Teacher 01 explained: "The difficulties happen more often with basic students because they are just learning basic English. So, they are not used to using idioms or different expressions in English. So, it is totally new to them" (Extract 21). Similarly, Teacher 03's response indicated the following:

*I have faced some difficulties. The first one is related students. When I first try to use one idiom, for example, piece of cake, my basic students just looked at me and were like: "but why a cake?", "are you bringing cake to the classroom?" I said no, and I had to explain to them what the idiom meant. (Extract 22).*

Specifically, these teachers' responses suggest that teaching idioms to basic students can be a challenge because they are not familiar with the complexities of these expressions.

Another challenge that the teachers verbalized during the interviews was students' lack of understanding of the meaning of idioms which, according to them, results in feelings of confusion. For example, Teacher 04 pointed out: "Students do not understand that some of them [idioms] have different meanings. They struggle a lot to understand that they do not carry a literal meaning. They are like: 'no, I do not understand why this means something different'" (Extract 23). Similarly, Teacher 05 found: "Some idioms are pretty obvious because the idiom is telling you what it means, but sometimes things are not connected at all, and students get confused or have more problems trying to figure out the meaning" (Extract 24). These teachers' responses suggest that idioms are expressions which may not be easily learned by students because of their frequent absence of literal meaning or presence of multiple meanings.

In summary, these five teachers endorsed the teaching of idioms in the language classroom, but most of them don't actually teach these expressions. Several benefits were mentioned during the interviews, such as the development of students' communicative skills. However, teachers reported that they avoided teaching idioms because they are required to use the textbook and they face time limitations. Their decision not to teach idioms in the classroom appeared to be reinforced by their feeling that basic students often struggle to understand the meaning of these expressions along with their perception that students often get confused when dealing with these expressions.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the factors that influence the English teachers' pedagogical decisions about teaching idiomatic expressions, and the likely challenges participants face in teaching these expressions in the language classroom. The results of this study suggest that various factors – including the teachers' understanding of idioms and the importance of these expressions, practical constraints, and student proficiency level – influenced these five teachers' perceptions of idioms and may have in turn shaped their teaching practices and classroom decisions. In general, the data obtained in the interviews show a complex picture of teachers who claim that they recognize the importance of teaching and learning idioms, but avoid doing so because of locally situated needs and other immediate demands that they perceive in their language classrooms. This argument is borne out by the findings of the study, as follows.

Firstly, the teachers' responses regarding the relation between language and culture are in line with Jiang's (2000) contention: "language simultaneously reflects the culture and is influenced and shaped by it. In the broadest sense, it is also the symbolic representation of people, since it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds, as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking" (p.1). Likewise, Doganay and Yergaliyev (2013) emphasize that teaching a language without culture is incomplete and inaccurate. All in all, the participants' responses revealed their positive attitudes towards teaching the relationship between language and culture.

Secondly, in respect to the definition and understanding of idioms, results suggested that the teachers had a notion of idioms as language expressions. However, two of the teachers were not able to recall a concrete example of an idiom. It is worth mentioning that the five teachers have a BA degree in English Teaching from the same northern university, despite the fact they received the same EFL teacher training, their responses suggested that the notion and understanding of idioms may vary among in-service EFL teachers. The relevance of this finding is that the teachers' varied understandings of idioms may have an impact on their pedagogical principles and decisions to teach these cultural expressions in the language classroom.

Thirdly, it was also suggested that that the teachers generally considered idioms to be important expressions because of the learning benefits that they provide to students. Namely, the teachers mentioned the following benefits:

- Idioms enhance comprehension among speakers;
- Idioms promote the development of students' oral competence; and
- Idioms improve the clarity of students' ideas during communication.

These learning benefits are supported in research literature. For example, Cooper (1999) states that "avoiding the use of idioms gives the language a bookish, stilted, unimaginative tone. Learning to use idioms is therefore extremely important for achieving command of authentic language" (p.26). Although the teachers perceived idioms as important cultural expressions, four reported that they don't teach them. Those elements are in line with Çakir's (2011) argument that "most of the EFL teachers either deliberately or unintentionally avoid touching idioms since they require time and extra effort to be devoted" (p.8). For

teachers in this study, decisions not to teach idioms appeared to be reinforced by their feeling that the basic proficiency level of their students (immediate demands) frequently results in their students' struggles to understand the meaning of these expressions. This limitation is related to the five major challenges around idioms which Pimenova (2011) proposes: "unknown vocabulary and unfamiliar idioms, no analogous idioms in L1, cultural differences, lack of experience dealing with idioms, and lack of the broad context for a given idiom" (p.119). Thus, the teachers' perceptions of these immediate demands seem to contrast with their assertions importance of the relationship between language and culture and, specifically, teaching idioms in the language classroom. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to examine their teaching context, and their beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes concerning the teaching of these cultural expressions (Liontas, 2015).

Based on the results of this study, we suggest that these teachers, along with other pre- and in-service teachers like them, need assistance in developing strategies for teaching idioms in line with their pedagogical principles. It is thus important that pre- and in-service teacher education promotes training which regularly helps teachers develop an understanding of real-life contextual factors and how to address these factors inside the classroom with a view to meeting their learning goals, both for their students and for themselves. Such training should provide teachers with opportunities for personal evaluation and reflection through activities in which they include topics and expressions related to idioms (Burke, 2011). Such training could help teachers find teaching practices with which they can develop students' oral competence, practices which are in line with their pedagogical beliefs and objectives (Borg, 2001). All in all, integrating idioms in the teaching and learning process of English can be "an essential and effective technique to help teachers and students support an innovative environment of learning and communication because it could be an effective way to provide students better conditions to improve their communicative skills" (De Caro, 2009).

### Conclusions

In conclusion, the present case study set out to explore five EFL teachers' perceptions of idioms and the role that these expressions play in teaching and learning the target language in the teachers' context. The results generally indicated a complex picture regarding what the five teachers believed about idioms, the importance of teaching idioms, and self-reported teaching practices. Our results demonstrated that due to locally situated needs and immediate demands related to the need to the textbook, class time constraints, and students' basic proficiency levels, the teachers have avoided teaching these expressions, which they initially claimed to be necessary to promote the communicative skills of their students.

Based upon the results, we suggest that teacher education programs should assist teachers. This could provide teachers with a understanding of idiomatic expressions and their learning benefits. This assistance should be in the form of hands-on experimentation, which could also help teachers develop an understanding of strategies that allow them to address their contextual constraints, enabling them to teach idioms in line with their pedagogical principles and beliefs.

Finally, a number of important limitations need to be considered. First, this study had a small sample size and characteristics of a case study. The generalizability of the findings is limited by the small number of participants and approach of the study. This small-scale research has revealed questions in need of further investigation. It is thus recommended that further research be undertaken to examine the relationship between teachers' perceptions of the role of idioms in teaching and learning and their teaching behavior in the classroom. Such further research would allow us to triangulate the contextual factors that appear to hinder teachers from teaching idioms despite their pedagogical beliefs.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Semi-structured Interview**

#### **Link between language and culture**

1. Besides grammar, what other aspects do you think that should be included in a classroom?
2. It is believed that language and culture are interrelated, what is your opinion about it?
3. Which topics would you use to teach culture or promote cultural knowledge to your students?

#### **Idioms in the classroom**

1. Can you please define in your own words what an idiom is?
2. Should idioms be taught in the language classroom? Why?
3. Do you include idioms? why?
4. In your opinion, do you think there are benefits of teaching and learning idioms for students' English competence?
5. Have you faced any difficulties when teaching idioms? (from teachers or students)

#### **Strategies to teach idioms**

1. Let us suppose that we are in your class. (Select an idiom) How would you teach the idiom you selected? Can you explain to me the process?
2. What is the role of context in teaching idioms?
3. Do you think it is important to include visual aids when teaching idioms? Why?
4. What other activities would be good to teach idioms?